DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 021 824 TE 000 367

By: Eichenberg, Mary Ann

BRINGING A CLASS TO ITS SENSES.

Pub Date: Sep 65
Note: 5p.
Journal Cit: English Journal, v54 n6 p515-18 Sep 1965
EDRS Price MF: $0.25 HC: $0.28
Descriptors: *COMPOSITION (LITERARY), COMPOSITION SKILLS (LITERARY), CREATIVE WRITING, *DESCRIPTIVE WRITING, *ENGLISH INSTRUCTION, LANGUAGE ENRICHMENT, SECONDARY EDUCATION, SENSORY EXPERIENCE, *TEACHING TECHNIQUES

Students can be taught to create vivid, colorful descriptions. To train their senses and sharpen their word choices and images, they can be asked to (1) list specific adjectives to describe such an image-producing word as "ocean," (2) substitute sharply-etched verbs for general ones in a given sentence, (3) record day-to-day observations in a notebook, (4) divide the description of a meal cooked at home into the categories of the five senses, (5) describe accurately a number of items to be touched, tasted, heard, smelled, or seen, (6) study sensory appeals in advertising and compose commercials themselves, (7) list the sensory experiences possible in an English classroom and compose a theme incorporating items from the list, and (8) visit a location which has outstanding sensory appeal, taking detailed notes and later writing about it. Such activities as these teach students to observe detail carefully, sense subtle shades of meaning, select exactly the right word, make fresh observations, and become aware of the stylistic differences of authors. (JB)

VOLUME 54 NUMBER 6

ENGLISH JOURNAL

TE 000 367
ED021824

SEPTEMBER 1965

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
OFFICE OF EDUCATION

THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL OFFICE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY.

Bringing a Class to Its Senses

Mary Ann Eichenberg

Midpark High School
Berea City School District
Berea, Ohio

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS COPYRIGHTED MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY Mary Ann Eichenberg and NCTE TO ERIC AND ORGANIZATIONS OPERATING UNDER AGREEMENTS WITH THE U.S. OFFICE OF EDUCATION. FURTHER REPRODUCTION OUTSIDE THE ERIC SYSTEM REQUIRES PERMISSION OF THE COPYRIGHT OWNER."

"The sun beats down on the window panes, forming rectangular black shadows on the tan window blinds."

"I hear the coarse scrapings of pencils across notebook paper and the swishing of someone's hand brushing erasings off the desk."

"I see the blackboard with the white remains of previously erased chalk clinging in splotches to the black surface."

VIVID, COLORFUL descriptions like these can be written by students who have been carefully trained to observe with the five senses.

A series of lessons which calls for the student to use skillfully his five senses demands neither extraordinary intelligence nor maturity. Even the weakest student can create sensory images which are striking and noteworthy. The key to success is not necessarily brain power, but the willingness to replace stereotyped descriptions with fresh new observations. Here are some suggested activities for training the senses which have worked successfully for my students.

First, put on the board a word such as *ocean* or *lake*, one that lends itself to image making. Then ask the students to call out as many picture words as they can which could be used to describe the subject named. At first, list all words indicated by the students, with no preference given to one word choice over another. Later, with the help of the class, go through the list of words, eliminating those which create no definite picture in the mind of the reader. Explain why words like *big*, *wet*, *deep*, and *large* suggest indefinite, blurred pictures, whereas words like *white-capped*, *swirling*, *frothy*, and *foam-maned* create specific, sharply-etched pictures.

Another activity which calls for a sharpening of vocabulary is to put on the board a sentence such as, "The girl walked down the hall." Ask the class to imagine the girl in a definite situation: (1) "The girl looks at the clock and realizes she has forty-five seconds left before the tardy bell rings. Her class is on the other side of the building." (2) "The girl has been reprimanded by her teacher for talking out of turn and has been sent to the principal's office for discipline." Then have the class list verbs for each sentence which would be more descriptive of the girl's actions in the situation than the verb *walk*. From ten to forty verbs may be suggested by the average class.

During this lesson someone is likely to ask if he may consult a dictionary to find synonyms for *walk*. This is the golden moment to introduce a thesaurus, if the students are not already familiar with it. Students should first be exposed to the college thesaurus rather than the standard version because the former is arranged alphabetically.

Once the student has sharpened his word choices and realizes the value of using the exact rather than the approximate or nearly right word, it is time to start on specific training for each of the five senses. To be stressed is the importance of first-hand, first-person observation. Trite, hackneyed expressions show up quickly in the writing of students who try to recollect a sensory experience, rather than writing about it while the experience is fresh in mind. Some-

TE 000 567

times it is helpful to remind students that Hemingway and Hawthorne kept notebooks just for the purpose of recording their day-to-day observations; these details were later used in their writing.

An activity which often brings good results is to have the student divide his paper into five parts, each corresponding to one of the senses. As a homework assignment, the student fills in the five sections with words and details which describe particular items of food as they are cooked for dinner or breakfast. It should be pointed out beforehand that the preparation of a fried or scrambled egg is likely to produce more interesting details than that of a hard-cooked one. Later the student may develop his list into sentences or paragraphs which involve as many of the senses as possible. Combined with this may be another brief word-building exercise, in which the values of *sizzle*, *crackle*, *splatter*, used in describing a frying egg are shown to be more appropriate than *cook* and *fry*.

If the students insist on following the Wordsworthian concept of "emotion recalled in retrospect," which may be appropriate for poetry but not for sensory writing, you may wish to do some descriptive work in class. To develop awareness of touch, supply the students with such diverse (and unbreakable) items as a hair roller, embossed cap pistol, snippet of net, taffeta or silk; foam rubber powder puff or bath mit, squirt of lotion or vaseline, emery board, ridged Christmas tree bulb, or charm bracelet. Number the items beforehand. Ask the student to list appropriate descriptive words in sections of his paper corresponding to the numbers of the items. Again, the importance of selection of image-making words must be stressed. (With a mature class, you may wish to use Emily Dickinson's "There Is No Frigate Like a Book" to point out the effectiveness of such words as *frigate*, *courser*, and *chariot* over such choices *boat*, *horse*, or *cart* for the same ideas.)

To develop perception to smell, the teacher should supply numbered plastic bottles containing small amounts of vinegar, perfume, hand lotion, Vicks, chocolate, shampoo, mouthwash, after-shave lotion, and linament. Explain to the class that to name and identify the item is not important; to describe exactly its odor is. While these two activities are most effective for the senses of touch and smell, singly, you may also find it effective to have students describe the items involving all the senses.

The senses of sight, hearing, and tasting may be treated in class in a similar manner, using items supplied by the teacher or students.

A useful activity at this point is a study of sensory appeals in advertising. Television commercials on mixes for cakes, pizza, and cookies, along with colorful two-page food spreads in such magazines as *Better Homes and Gardens* and *McCall's*, furnish good examples for this study. The food pictures have amazing effectiveness with classes meeting directly before lunch, whereas their appeal seems to taper off starting around 1:00 p.m.

After noting the careful word choices of writers of TV commercials and advertising copy, the student may wish to try his own commercial. Display a folder of food pictures — in color, naturally — which can be used by the class for this assignment. Pictures of cake, cookies, baked Alaska, pie, and pizza usually prove to be effective for promoting sensory description, while pictures of fruit, nuts, cereal — items lacking in appeal to one or more of the senses — fail to motivate the student strongly. Have the student imagine that he is sitting down at the table to eat the luscious item depicted in the picture and that he is to write a paragraph describing the food as it appeals to the senses. Re-emphasize why sentences such as "The strawberry shortcake looks good" and "The pizza smells delicious" are weak in sensory ap-

peal and would not be effective sales pitches for these items. All students may write on the same picture so that you have the same criteria for evaluating the papers, or you may choose to have each write on a different picture.

After concentrated effort on short assignments such as these, progress to a longer piece of writing. Here are two novel assignments which call for the student's using his imagination.

The first is a description of a location outside the school which has outstanding sensory appeal. Bakeries, drive-in restaurants, gas stations, candy shops, beauty salons, barber shops, dime stores, soda fountains, the woods in spring or fall, or the kitchen at home will furnish the aspiring writer with ample material for a two or three-page sensory theme. Before writing, the student should visit the place he plans to write about, jotting down in his notebook as many sensory details as he can. Later, to facilitate writing the theme, these details can be listed in groups according to each of the five senses. As he compiles his list, the student, hopefully, will include those descriptive words which he finds to be the most exact, and will eliminate those which add nothing to his word picture. Careful preparation of the list will save time and effort when preparing drafts of the theme itself.

After the student prepares his list, you will probably wish to evaluate it for word choice and originality of observation before the student begins work on his theme.

You may wish to suggest two possible ways to organize the theme. Easiest for the student who has trouble organizing is to arrange the ideas sense by sense. Each paragraph will then have a general topic sentence and be supported by detailed examples. The second is to arrange the ideas in chronological order, as they reached the perception of the writer. This approach calls for certain sophisticated organizational skills on the part of the writer and is recommended for those who have already shown competence in logically arranging ideas.

The writing of this theme provides a wonderful opportunity to review (or introduce) paragraph elements such as unity, development, and transitions. Each paragraph, if the student writes sense by sense, will have a clear, central controlling idea; each paragraph by necessity will be expanded through the use of supporting details. Transitions, naturally, should be used from paragraph to paragraph to insure coherence.

An alternate composition, based on the same principles, may be done from classroom observation. Here the student again prepares a sensory list based on the sights, sounds, smells, touches, and tastes of his English room. In most classrooms the sense of taste will be lacking, but adequate examples may be observed in the other categories to compensate. To supply adequate examples, it is best to leave the classroom door ajar, so that all the sounds of a busy school — students talking in the hall, slamming of locker doors, clicking of heels — may be heard. Urge the students to observe one another for highly specific details in the 'sight' category; use of names always adds interest if the best items are to be read aloud. After the lists are prepared, several alternatives are suggested. First, the lists may be read aloud and the best items re-copied and displayed on the bulletin board. Second, each student may prepare a one paragraph theme, using his best items. Third, class editors may be chosen to evaluate each person's list, selecting the best items and compiling them in a composite theme.

These activities, beginning with the selection of the proper word and progressing ultimately to the writing of a complete, organized theme offer several values to the student. First, he learns that there is no substitute for careful observation of detail when he is writing description. Depth of perception and

sensitivity will, of course, differ from student to student, but each will add to his writing skill if he takes time to use his five senses. Second, the student becomes aware of fine shades of meaning connected with various words. He realizes the importance of making the proper word choice, of selecting the word which says *exactly* what he means.

Finally, this experience may create in the student an awareness of the styles of various authors. The student should be able to recognize that the use of fresh, original observation gives power to such selections as Steinbeck's *Red Pony*, Maureen Daly's "Sixteen," and Thomas Wolfe's "Promise of America."

Observing with the five senses can be entertaining and rewarding.